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ABSTRACT

Three unjustified assumptions are often made about young beginners in reading: they all are acquainted with books and reading, the children and the teacher are thinking in the same terms when each talks about reading, and children understand the technical terms of literacy. Reading authorities refer to this lack of understanding of what the reading task is all about as cognitive confusion. Many young children do not have adequate concepts of the terms in their teacher's instructional vocabulary. The degree of a child's cognitive clarity about the task of learning to read is linked to the home environment. Research studies have found that many children do come to school without a clear understanding of the functions and tasks involved in reading. To clear up cognitive confusion in young children and to help them develop an understanding of the nature and function of reading, the teacher needs to give the children many meaningful experiences with the printed word. (WR)

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COGNITIVE CONFUSION IN READING AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO BEGINNING READING

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There are three unjustified assumptions which are often made about young beginners in reading: (1) that they all are acquainted with books and reading; (2) the children and the teacher are thinking in the same terms when each talks about "reading"; and (3) children understand the technical terms of literacy. In actual fact children come to school with quite hazy and confused ideas about language and reading. Some children have seen very little, if any, reading done in their home. A number of children have only vague notions about what reading is used for, and are uncertain or confused about what reading elements and tasks they should attend to. Many have no knowledge of the specialized vocabulary - "sound," "letter," "word," "sentence," the teacher uses in talking to children about reading. Reading authorities refer to this lack of understanding of what the reading task is all about as "cognitive confusion." Many school beginners start out confused. To prove this, just ask a class of kindergarteners or beginning first graders "What is reading?" Some reading authorities, for example, Downing and Thackray (1975) and Vernon (1957) believe this to be one of the prime causes of reading failure for young children.

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The children simply don't understand what the reading task is!

How Children Become Confused About Reading

To understand how cognitive confusion about reading develops, one has to look at the way a young child perceives his own listening and speaking behavior. Already before the child comes to school he is a proficient user of language. He communicates quite well in talking and he is successful in listening. He talks and listens but he has never thought about how he does it. Speech production is for the most part an automatic continuous flow. He uses what the teacher perceives as units of meaning and sound: phonemes, words, phrases, and sentences, but the child does not know he is using them. He is quite unaware of the elements of speech and listening skills he employs. As Goodman states in looking at reading as language acquisition, "The whole is not a combining of parts; the part is differentiated out of the whole" (K. S. Goodman, 1968, p. 31). Forester (1975) observed and taped the dialogue between a kindergarten teacher and her class. She writes,

> Explanations provided by the teacher about such concepts as words and sentences frequently fail to elicit a response or sign of recognition. Children appear to deal with language in patterns and semantic units. Classification of the language into discrete grammatical units at the word level has not yet been internalized.
> When asked by the teacher to give their favorite word, two of the kindergarten children responsed with "happy face" and "swimming lesson." Their responses to the teacher's explanation that those were two words were respectively, "Then I don't know." (p. 59)

Similar cognitive confusion exists about the written or printed language. Meltzer and Herse (1969) asked prereaders to take a card with a sentence printed on it and cut off a word from it. Again the children demonstrated their confusion of the concept "word" by frequently cutting off parts of words or more than one word. Evanechko, Ollila, Downing, and Braun (1973) gave beginning first graders a test of "Technical Language of Literacy." This tested the child's understanding of what a number, letter, and word was. They found that 15% - 20% of the children had difficulty in discriminating between word, number and letter.

It is not surprising that children are confused about the terms "sound" as used by most reading teachers. In children's language experiences "sound" has usually meant different noises around them. Also as Vygotsky (1962) observes, the young child usually considers the word as the object it denotes and not as a name or utterance for the object. The child does not have a clear conception of semantics and phonetics. Ollila, Johnson, and Downing (1947) found that only 15% of the kindergarten children initially pretested had any understanding of how many sounds were in words of one to four phonemes. Downing and Oliver (1974) found that children even up to age eight confused phonemes and syllables with "words." An interesting sidelight of their study was the tendency for the children between the ages of 5.6 to 6.5 to exclude long words from their idea of what a spoken word was. The researchers speculated that this might be the result of the children's learning to read from primary readers where words are often from three to five given letters in length. These children's erroneous concept of "word" has been formed from their many experiences with the short words in their readers.

Many young children do not have adequate concepts of the terms in their teacher's instructional vocabulary. Many beginners also have little knowledge or at best vague notions of what "reading" is going to be like. In Scotland, Reid (1966) interviewed five year olds to explore their general level of concepts about reading and writing. She reported that the children demonstrated a "general lack of specific expectations of what reading was going to be like, of what the activity consisted in, of the purpose and the use of it." She also found that "children did not mention that books contained stories, but when asked about "stories" some said these were not anything to do with reading." Similar results were gotten by Downing (1970) who replicated Reid's study with English children.

How Children's Home Environment Influences Understanding of Reading

The degree of a child's cognitive clarity about the task of learning to read is linked to the home environment. Malmquist (1958) in Sweden studying factors relating to reading ability in first grade found only 7 out of 53 poor readers came from homes possessing more than 100 books. Examining the relation of first graders' reading readiness to patterns of parent-child interaction in the home, Milner (1951) found that children who became better readers had a richer verbal environment than poorer readers. Better readers had more books at home and were read to more frequently by adults. Parents of this type of child often make explanations and point out words when reading to their children. The stories develop the children's listening and attending skills too. If the children show any sign of interest in books, words or numbers, these parents tend to reinforce it with attention and positive remarks. Then the parents look for

other opportunities to point out other words and letters and repeat these prereading experiences of what "reading" is. Thus, by the time these children reach school and formal reading instruction, they have had many experiences with reading and have far more sophisticated concepts of their task than their less "book-minded"peers. Sakamoto (1974), reporting on the experiences of preschool children in Japan, points out the great number of books and magazines that were published for preschoolers which Japanese parents buy at the rate of two or three a month. From national surveys he reports that only 9% of all four year olds were unable to read any Hiragana characters (one of the Japanese syllabic writing systems). He observes that the children begin to read at home at the age of four without any formal reading readiness program. He believes that the parents' concern for the reading of their children and their provision of many experiences with books have very important effects on children's initial steps in learning to read.

Children from home backgrounds with few reading materials and where little reading is done, do not have the same opportunities to develop a clear understanding of the reading task and vocabulary. In a study by Downing, Ollila, and Oliver (1975) Canadian Indian children's concepts of reading and writing were compared with non-Indian kindergarteners living in the same area. The Indian children came from bands in which there is no tradition of literacy. Their culture provides only very limited experiences of writing or concern for language analysis. The Indian kindergarteners speak a form of English in the home, but there is far less verbal communication there than in non-Indian homes. The researchers found that the Indian children were significantly less able to recognize the acts of "reading" and "writing." They had more immature concepts of the communicative function of reading and writing. Their understanding of the technical

vocabulary "word" and "letter" was significantly poorer.

From the above studies the reader can see that many children do come to school without a clear understanding of the functions and tasks involved in reading. Cognitive clarity about reading seems enhanced in a home environment which provides opportunities and experiences to interest a child and give him sufficient reliable information about the act of reading and its terminology. The home environment varies in providing opportunities for such development.

Recommendations to Clear Up Children's Cognitive Confusion About Reading

Research clearly shows the influence of home background in the development of children's understanding of the purpose of reading and their concepts of language units employed in the written code. Many parents of preschoolers need to be educated and helped to provide an atmosphere which will develop their children's understanding of the reading task. Group discussions of the importance of using books and talking to children in helping them clarify their concepts may be a valuable aid.

Kindergarten and first grade teachers need to be aware of children's cognitive confusion about reading. Teachers should have an understanding of the different concepts involved in learning to read. More time should be spent in kindergarten and first grade in providing children with appropriate reading experiences so that they can learn what "reading" is -- what people do when they read, why they want to read and so on. Often the majority of readiness training is spent in direct teaching of such skills as visual and auditory discrimination, left to right orientation and general speaking. These are important, but so is the total picture of what reading is all about.

To clear up cognitive confusion in young children and to help them develop an understanding of the nature and function of reading, the teacher needs to give the children many meaningful experiences with the printed word. The

teacher shares the enjoyment of books with the class. Bulletin boards have posted messages for the children - birthdays of the month, room helpers and so on. Children's pictures are given captions which children dictate to their teachers. The teacher prints short daily messages on the board such as "Good Morning," or "We are going on a field trip today," and points to the words as she reads them to the children. Experience charts are used to record group happenings. Through these types of activities children gradually develop and refine a clearer concept of the communicative aspect of reading - reading as talk written down. The skilled teacher tries to make children see that reading is important and useful for them. She tries to guide children to the enjoyment, drama, mystery, fantasy, and information aspects of the printed word which "hook" people on reading and make them life-long readers.

In teaching the language of literacy, much of the teaching is best done by example. To teach definitions of a "word," "sentence" etc. is an exercise in futility. Young children don't learn that way. Reading language is taught well through using chart stories composed by the children and transcribed by the teacher. The teacher, pointing to a word, may say "Who remembers this word?" She may cup her hands around a sentence and ask someone to "Read the sentence". Gradually through this apparently incidental pointing out specific examples of this reading language, the children will develop the concepts . Some more sophisticated methods and materials are beginning to be developed for helping children to achieve cognitive clarity in beginning reading. For example, to teach the idea that words are made up of sounds in a certain serial order, Ollila, Johnson, and Downing (1974) adapted Elkonin's (1973) technique for training Russian children to perceive phonemes. Concrete objects were used to represent sounds in the words and the children were taught to distinguish between the different

sounds in words.

This paper has attempted to discuss some of the problems the beginning readers face in trying to understand what is expected of them in initial reading. Some children do not understand what the reading process is all about. Many have only hazy ideas of the terminology the teacher uses in beginning reading. Frequently the teacher is talking to the children at their "frustration level" when she uses reading terms with them. As teachers develop a better understanding of children's thinking about reading, they will be better equipped to provide a program that clears up this confusion about reading. This is an area of growing research interest and many new developments can be predicted in the next decade.

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